

**Center for Information, Technology, & Public Life (CITAP), University
of North Carolina at Chapel Hill • What Comes After "Disinformation"?**

Authoritarian Neoliberal Statecraft and the Political Economy of Mis/Disinformation: Resituating Western- Centric Debates in a Vietnamese Context

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ABSTRACT

Academic and popular discussions of misinformation, disinformation, and “fake news” have prioritized the concerns of Western liberal democracies. In the rather different context of Vietnam, we highlight how the interplay of authoritarian state logics, corporate interests, weak journalism, and repressed civil society culture explains the way mis/disinformation manifests in Vietnamese news media. We argue that the ongoing need to de-Westernize media and communication studies must be part of any satisfactory answer to the question of “what comes after disinformation studies.”

Introduction

Scholars have attempted to generalize the factors contributing to the production and spread of mis/disinformation, mostly in Global North news media and social media (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Farkas & Schou, 2019; Wang et al., 2019). These debates have often been animated by a Westernized moral panic about the power of social media corporations, exemplified by the post-mortems after the Brexit vote and Trump’s election in 2016 (Anderson, 2021).

This paper recasts these debates in the Global South, specifically Vietnam. Building on political economy approaches (Hardy, 2014) and the comparative media system framework of Hallin and Mancini (2004), **we argue that it is not possible to make sense of how mis/disinformation works in the Vietnamese public sphere without understanding how the authoritarian party-state controls the country’s news media and aligns its political interests with the commercial interests of private corporations.** This ecology is mediated, in turn, by commercially driven news media that are overdependent on clickbait and largely unresponsive to civil society concerns. Accordingly, this paper examines, from a critical interpretivist perspective, how the different factors visualized in Figure 1 intersect in the production of mis/disinformation.

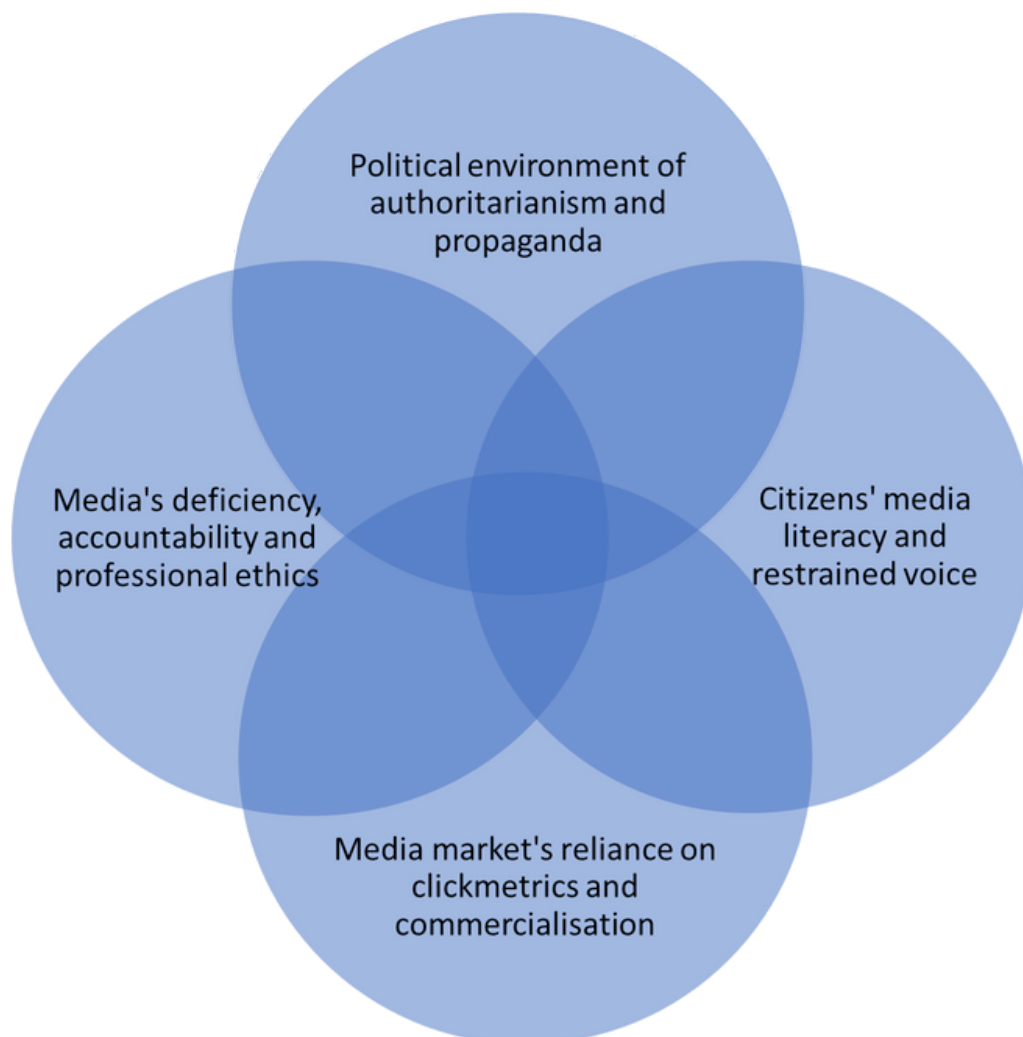


Figure 1: Factors contributing to mis/disinformation proliferation in Vietnamese news media

Situating Vietnam in the Global Mis/disinformation Phenomenon

Our argument builds on a recent article (Yến-Khanh et al., 2022) that, under the conceptual heading of “authoritarian neoliberalism,” suggests it is not helpful to assume a rigid dichotomy between market and state when examining political-media cultures in Vietnam. The same point applies to the critical examination of how a culture of mis/disinformation is enabled by potential alliances between the Vietnamese party-state, local “backyard corporations,” global big tech companies, and national news media.

In the authoritarian political economy of Vietnam, the Communist Party and its Central Ideology and Propaganda Department directly appoint Editors-in-Chief and key personnel at all media outlets and steer regular meetings about how to frame current affairs. Media workers rarely investigate and frame social problems from an open-ended interpretative perspective, let alone politicize them by holding state institutions directly accountable (Yến-Khanh, 2020). Controlled by the Communist political system, media institutions are

subject to a Press Law established in 2016, which regulates their operation, practices, and ethical codes, and also administers audience rights and responsibilities. On the one hand, the authorities can repress and punish media institutions harshly with imprisonment of newsroom staff or closure when they are perceived as covering “taboo” political topics. On the other hand, the authorities barely take action against civic violations of the Press Law by journalists, hence media outlets are not uniquely responsible for their journalistic failings. In addition, the authorities maintain a troop of 10,000 propagandists/commentators to shape public opinion on the internet and social media, as Lieutenant General Nguyễn Trọng Nghĩa revealed in a *Tuoitre.vn*'s news article (Mai Hoa, 2017).

Since the 1986 *Đổi mới Reforms* that steered Vietnam to a so-called socialist-oriented market economy that remained under the same authoritarian political system, Vietnamese news media are mostly owned by the State but have commercial business models. They now compete in the advertising market with global social media companies. Facebook penetrates 59% of the digital advertising market in Vietnam and Google holds 29%, while Vietnamese online media claim only 10% of the pie (GroupM, 2020). In Vietnam's \$3 billion internet market (USD) (Google & Temasek/Bain, 2019), Facebook and Google sometimes cooperate with the authorities to silence dissidents' political debates, as a recent Amnesty International report described (Reed, 2020). **The role played by big tech companies in potentially enabling mis/disinformation in Vietnam is not an innocent or insignificant one, but, at the same time, needs to be understood as part of the other infrastructural issues** highlighted in this paper.

The concert between political censorship and media commodification discourages the exercise of journalistic ethics and standards, instead motivating media practitioners to construct dramas and mis/disinformation to game search engine algorithms. Newsroom staff are either not trained or poorly trained; consequentially, their journalistic skills and ethics are often questionable (Hang Dinh, 2004; Nguyen, 2006). Their lack of journalistic autonomy makes them even more susceptible to commercial pressures than their Western counterparts, particularly when those commercial interests are aligned with party-state imperatives.

In addition, the majority of Vietnamese newsroom staff view public relations as an “intimate friend” of journalism (Nguyen, 2008, p. 125), and many service providers pay fees to promote themselves in public relations posts disguised as news stories (p. 126). As such, those who have access and resources to reach out to the media can shape the “primary definition” of the issues and events based on their own interests, often without any significant mediation from the “secondary definers” of journalism (Hall, et al. 1978).

Citizens' media literacy and restrained voice also contribute to the virality of mis/disinformation. Accustomed to a culture of top-down propaganda, Vietnamese citizens neither trust the authorities (UNDP, 2015) nor official media. Thus, they barely raise their own voice to officially hold the authorities and media accountable for social injustices (Nicholson, 2001) or unethical journalistic practices. However, given the affordances of social media, netizens can informally raise their voices, sometimes making the mainstream media and authorities more responsive when the issues discussed are seen as politically trivial and “non-taboo” (Nguyen,

2009). Coming from such a low democratic baseline, netizens' engagement with social media platforms can enable rudimentary democratic values that sometimes challenge top-down mis/disinformation, suggesting a rather different story to the one animating dominant Western accounts of the mis/disinformation crisis (Farkas & Schou, 2019). The above discussion is summed up in Figure 2 below.



Figure 2: Resituating the mis/disinformation debate in the Vietnamese context

Mis/Disinformation, News Media, and Stem Cell Hype

We will now briefly support our argument by citing how the Vietnamese news media represented a recent medical treatment story. The media is often eager to promote cures for autism spectrum disorder to desperate parents, including publicizing various quack therapies. This is partly driven by clickbait mechanisms, but it also occurs because newsroom staff can be incentivized by an “envelop culture” (Nguyen, 2008, p. 125), where commercial entities offer financial benefits to journalists and editors who write flattering articles about their products and services without any verification or due diligence. Specifically, VinMec International Hospital has promoted stem cell therapy as an advanced treatment for autism, even though globally most stem cell treatments are still under clinical trials with unresolvable issues on ethics, legality, safety, and efficacy (Aly, 2020).

VinMec International Hospital is a Vietnamese private hospital owned by the powerful Vingroup corporation. In a political economy structured by “red cronyism/capitalism” (Beresford, 2008) and interest groups’ “rent seeking” (Vuving, 2013), generations of top Communist leaders and media staff openly support Vingroup’s projects with favourable policies and publicity. When a VinMec team led by Nguyễn Thanh Liêm published a journal article, reporting an initial uncontrolled clinical trial of stem cell transplants for 30 children with autism (Nguyen Thanh et al., 2021), whose content was released to Vietnamese news media in 2020, local outlets hyped the story with various misleading statements. *Sức khỏe và Đời sống* (Health and Life, 2020) triumphally proclaimed, “Autistic children magically recovered thanks to stem cell transplant.” *Vietnam Plus* (2020) declared, “Việt Nam pioneered in stem cell transplant to treat childhood autism.” *Công an Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh* (Hồ Chí Minh City Police, 2020) asserted national pride by writing, “Many stem cell studies by Vietnam were ahead of the world and” *Thanh Niên* (The Youth, 2020) trumpeted, “90% of children have made clear progress in cognition, social communication and life skills, after stem cell transplant.” Cumulatively, the media coverage framed Vietnam as a world leader in stem cell research. These nationalist storylines have a distinct appeal for Vietnamese media, which VinMec then leveraged to position itself as “flying the Vietnamese flag” in the world.

Stem cell hype in Vietnam resonates with sensationalist news representation of stem cell therapy elsewhere, despite the lack of scientific evidence of its safety and efficacy (Kamenova, 2017; Regenber, 2019). In many cases, “intentionally hyping claim(s) is at minimum inaccurate, deceptive, and potentially dishonest and defies many of the ethical and professional responsibilities scientists and other professionals are expected to uphold” (Master & Resnik, 2013, p. 324).



Photo by [Markus Winkler](#) on [Unsplash](#)

After its publication, the VinMec-aligned journal article by Nguyen Thanh et al. (2021) received critical feedback in *Stem Cell Translational Medicine*, which called for its retraction because of its abusive, invasive, and misleading qualities (Ballen & Kurtzberg, 2021; Finlay-Morreale, 2021). When the debate about VinMec's stem cell bioethics violation was brought up by the first author of this paper in a Vietnamese forum for research integrity on Facebook in June 2021, citing a blog post on the retraction call (Harry Le, 2021), the discussion generated criticism from Vietnamese researchers worldwide. In July 2021, VinMec took the unprecedented step of refunding approximately 700 families for stem cell treatment fees collected from 2014 to 2021. If the medical fees had been fully refunded, it would have reached an estimated \$7 million (USD), but the company termed the refund a charity act and did not fully compensate many families. The controversy was brought to the attention of state-run news media who decided to ignore it, meaning invisibility in the official public sphere for what would have surely been a high-profile news story in many other countries.

Conclusion

This short paper highlights how the interplay of an authoritarian political environment, state-supported corporate interests, clickbait-driven media, poor journalism standards, and the inhibition of an autonomous civic culture help explain the diffusion of mis/disinformation in Vietnam. It offers a rather different account to the one typically presupposed in a Westernized academic literature that explains the rise of mis/disinformation

primarily with reference to social media corporations. **Indeed, as a contrast to moralized discourses that blame social media for all the ills of the world, our case study shows how the affordances of digital culture play an important democratic role in giving Vietnamese citizens a chance to challenge the normalized silences of the country's official public sphere.**

A critical understanding of mis/disinformation must take into account the political dynamics of particular national contexts like Vietnam as part of any project of de-Westernizing media and communication studies. But we can make a wider claim: a similar mapping of the relationship between different state, corporate, and civic society actors and interests should be the starting point for critically understanding the mis/disinformation crisis in Western-style liberal democracies. By inverting the usual script where the Global South "case study" is framed as the (condescending) afterthought to the universalizing authority of Euro-American science, our analysis points to one generative answer to the provocation "what comes after disinformation studies?" That, in turn, might enable us to better combat a more predictable kind of North/South information flow, where a self-preoccupied westernized moral panic about disinformation becomes a useful political weapon for authoritarian regimes in Vietnam and elsewhere.

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